

## Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*: Conflict between the Marginalized and the Privileged

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Since the time immemorial, a wide divide between the rich and the poor, the centre and the periphery, has been the bane of social set up. Modern times in particular are a mute witness to the widening gap between the mighty and the weak, the exploiters and the exploited, the small things and the big things. The rich and mighty people are madly engaged in thoughtless accumulation of unlimited wealth and power. They miss no opportunity in staking claim over the wealth that should naturally and equitably fall to the share of their less fortunate brethren. The poor people's dependence on the rich for sustenance and betterment of life is still a prominent socio-economic norm despite stupendous development in areas like economy and education. Given these conditions, the rich are growing richer and the poor poorer. Arundhati Roy's Booker Prize winning novel *The God of Small Things* exposes the conflict between the privileged and the underprivileged more exhaustively than any other contemporary novel. This paper aims to probe into this subject of global importance in the light of its treatment by Arundhati Roy in her most successful debut fictional work.

The entire novel is devoted to the delineation of the world marked by a conflict between the small things and the big things, the mombattis and the laltains. The world of big things is inhabited by the arrogant, egoist, self-centered, opportunist and ambitious people such as Chacko, Pappachi and K.N.M Pillai. On the other hand, the world of small things is represented by the marginalized persons like Velutha, Ammu, Estha, Rahel, Vellya Paapen, Kuttappen and Kachu Maria. Baby Kochamma and Mammachi stay somewhere in between. Pappachi, the ex-Director of Entomology Department, New Delhi, is at the helm of affairs in the Ayemenem House situated in the town of Ayemenem in Kerala. A man of self respect, given to maintain his prestige after his retirement, he is very careful about his dress, appearance and image. He takes it below his dignity to let his wife run the business of pickle making. His old servant Vellya Paapen occasionally brings him coconuts plucked from the trees in the compound. He never allows Paapen to use the front door of the Ayemenem House for his entry and touch the things that the touchable touch. He is excessively conservative in respect of his attitude towards women and their participation in educational and professional affairs. His wife Mammachi and daughter Ammu, despite being submissive and docile, unquestionably bear his arrogant behaviour and malicious treatment. Whenever anything goes against his will, Mammachi and Ammu fall a victim to his wrath. He always respects those who enjoy a respectable and dominating position in politics and society and humiliates those who are penniless and helpless. He sends his son Chacko to Oxford for higher studies and prevents his daughter from improving her career. Thus, the big things find favour with him and small things are regrettably held by him in a very low esteem. Chacko, following his father's footsteps, shows utmost insensitivity to the plight of those who represent the smallness of things. He loves his wife Margaret Kochamma and Sophie Mol from the core of his heart and hates Ammu and her twins. With his "Marxist mind and feudal libido",<sup>1</sup> Chacko feels drawn towards the female labourers working in his pickle factory and flirts with them on the pretext of lecturing them. He does not allow Ammu to have any say in the matters concerning the Ayemenem House and pickle factory. He tenaciously says to her, "What is mine is mine and what is yours is also mine" (57). A member of "the wonderful male chauvinist society" (57), he always refers to the pickle factory as "my factory, my pineapples, my pickles" (57). The moment he comes to know

of Ammu-Velutha relationship, he asks Ammu, "Get out of my house before I break every bone in your body" (60). Hereafter, Ammu's life gets beset with trauma after trauma and takes a turn towards the tragic end which occurs in Bharat Lodge.

Besides Pappachi and Chacko, Arundhati Roy's another male character who represents the big things is the Marxist leader K.N.M. Pillai. Given to self aggrandisement like Pappachi, Pillai is excessively inconsiderate to the plight of the marginalized. Instead of helping Velutha in his difficult times, Pillai frustrates him by asking why he came so late in the night. As "the man he was talking to was small" (287), he said, "You should know that party was not constituted to support workers' indiscipline in their private life." (287) Although Velutha is a committed card holding member of Marxist Party, Pillai treats him as inferior to the touchable and that is why he tells Chacko, "Better for him you send him off." (229)

The world of small things presented by Arundhati Roy in the novel is, for its existence, dependent on the world of big things. Velutha, the God of losses, is dependent on the mercy of Mammachi for his livelihood. There is a big gap between Velutha, the God of small things and Chacko, the God of big things in respect of their socio-economic status. While Chacko belongs to the upper crust of Christian Community, and is gifted with "the Prime Ministered material," (56) Velutha "stands out as the representative of the untouchable. "He belongs to the class of people who were not allowed to walk on the public roads, not allowed to carry umbrellas."<sup>2</sup> In spite of his technical expertise, he is denied the natural right to the life of freedom and dignity. Having no regard to his abilities that are uncommon in Paravans, his father resents "the way he says, the way he does" (33) When his father comes to know of his relationship with Ammu, he asks "God's forgiveness for having spawned a monster and offers to kill his son, to tear him from limb to limb" (256). Chacko's illicit relationship with his factory workers is not frowned upon by anyone. But Velutha's love for Ammu is taken as an unpardonable sin for which he is subjected to unbearable physical and mental torture and finally to his traffic death. Like Velutha, Vellya Paapen and Velutha's elder brother Kuttappen also depend on the Ayemenem House for their sustenance. Vellya Paapen, an "Old World Paravan", lives in a small hut in vicinity with the grand house of his master Pappachi. In spite of being unflinchingly loyal to the Ayemenem House, he is not allowed to enter the house through the front door and touch the things that the touchable touch. Being a docile conformist, he never objects to the discriminatory treatment meted out to him by Pappachi and Mammachi. Instead, he develops in himself an attitude of gratitude which is "as wide and deep as a river in spate" (37). Unlike his son Velutha, who is a rebel having within himself a volcano ready to burst any time, Paapen ungrudgingly bears humiliation to which he is often subjected because of his very low status in society. Mammachi treats him like a dog when he honestly reveals what he has seen on the bank of the Meenanachal river. Ammu is equally responsible for the violation of law of love. But, Paapen holds his son solely responsible for this sin. Yet, he is not shown leniency by Mammachi. Instead, she pushes him with all her strength into the wet mud and spits on him.

Velutha's brother, Kuttappen, the most tragic character in the novel, stands for the smallest thing in the world of the small. Paralyzed from the chest downward, "he lay flat on his back and watched his youth saunter past without stopping to say hello. As he lay there on his hard bed, bits of thatch and grit fell onto him from the ceiling and mingled with his sweat. Sometimes ants and other insects fell with it on bad days. The orange walls held hands and went over him inspecting him like malevolent doctors, slowly, deliberately, squeezing the breath out of him and making him scream. Sometimes they needed of their own accord and the room he lay in grew impossibly large, terrorizing him with the spectre of his own insignificance". (206-07) The plight of the marginalized generally remains hidden from the public view. So does the plight of Kuttappen. His tragic condition melts Rahel and Estha to pity when they visit the dark chamber of his hut in which he "appeared on his bed, a glistening genie in the gloom. The whites of his eyes were dark yellow. The soles of his feet (soft from so much lying down) stuck

out from under the cloth covered his legs. They were still stained a pale orange from years of walking barefoot on red mud. He had gray callouses on his ankles from the chafing of the rope that Paravans tied around their feet when they climbed coconut trees” (208). To the twins’ unpleasant surprise, the small hut in which Kuttappen is putting up with along with his brother and father is littered with the items borrowed from the Ayemenem House. As the novelist puts it:

There were other things from the Ayemenem House that had either been given to them or salvaged from the rubbish bin. Rich things in a poor house. A clock that didn’t work, a flowered tin waste paper basket. Pappachi’s old riding boots (brown, with green mould) with the cobbler’s trees still in them. Biscuit tins with sumptuous pictures of English castles and ladies with bustles and ringlets. (209)

Among the female characters of Arundhati Roy, Ammu and Rahel are the worst suffers and most discriminated against by both the male and female characters. In her childhood Ammu is victimized by her conservative father whose discriminatory attitude adversely affects her career. She is denied an opportunity to improve her career and is subjected to mental and physical torture with the result that she desires to marry in a haste so as to get rid of the morbid situation. She is like the one who marries in haste and repents at leisure. Her married life is spoiled due to her husband’s disgusting addiction to alcohol. Shortly after marriage, her husband grows insensitive to her physical and emotional demands and even goes to the extent of yielding to his boss’s proposal of sending his attractive wife to be “looked after.” On her refusal to give her body in lieu of her husband’s service, she is subjected to domestic violence. Fed up with “his bouts of violence that began to include the children” (42) and disgusted with “the medicinal smell of stale alcohol that seeped through his skin, and the dry, caked vomit that encrusted his mouth like a pie every morning”, (42) Ammu leaves her husband and returns “unwelcomed” (42) to the Ayemenem House along with her twins. Her presence in the Ayemenem House is frowned upon by everybody including her mother and brother. Her maternal aunt Baby Kochamma’s outrage against her return is not unexpected as she wholeheartedly espouses the conservative view that a married daughter has no position in her parent’s home and a divorced daughter has no position anywhere at all. To better her lot, Ammu tries to win the favour of her mother by helping her in successfully running her pickle factory. Although Ammu’s contribution to the success of the pickle factory is greater than Chacko’s, she is not allowed to stake claim on anything within the periphery of the factory and the Ayemenem House. To her utmost dismay, her children, who need special attention for their growth, are looked down upon by everyone including the maid servant, Kachu Maria with the result that they develop in themselves inferiority complex. Deprived of emotional support and elders’ affection in the Ayemenem House, the twins feel solace in the company of Velutha. Ammu feels drawn to Velutha due to his love for twins and his position as a rebel. Her love for Velutha is resented by everyone and is taken as a violation of the law of love (who should be loved, how and how much?) Her fate also does not approve of her love relationship. Velutha is arrested and imprisoned on charges of murder and rape. To help her lover in the time of his trouble, Ammu visits the Kottayam Police Station where the Police Inspector humiliates her by addressing her as *Vaishya*. Her agony knows no bound when she is told that her lover has died of policeman’s torture in the lock-up. To get rid of emotional breakdown & financial crisis, she plans to join a job as someone’s secretary. Like her earlier plans, her plan to stand on her feet fails to see the light of the day as she tragically dies in the Bharat Lodge. Thus, Ammu is tortured and discriminated against by her father and brother in the Ayemenem House, by her husband in Assam and by the Police Inspector in the Kottayam Police Station.

Being the daughter of Ammu, the goddess of small things, Rahel does not get the degree of warmth and affection that is offered to Sophie Mol in the Ayemenem House. On her first arrival in the Ayemenem House Sophie Mol is accorded a warm welcome by Mammachi and

Baby Kochamma whose attitude toward Rahel smacks of prejudice. To her they provided “The care (food, clothes, fees) but withdrew the concern.” (13) At the age of eleven she is black listed in Nazareth Convent School for “Decorating a knob of fresh cow dung with small flowers” (16) and is expelled from school on charges of “hiding behind doors and deliberately colliding with senior girls” (16). After finishing her school education, she is admitted to a mediocre college of Architecture in Delhi where “the fees were low and it wasn’t hard to scratch out a living, staying in the hostel, eating in the subsidized student mess, rarely going to class, working instead as a draughtsman in gloomy, architectural firms that exploited cheap student labour to render their presentation drawings and to blame when things went wrong.” (18) Thus, in her student life Rahel does not get proper attention and guidance of her elders. She receives “inadequate socialization and grows without a brief.” (17) Right from her birth, she is doomed to lead a life of fret and fever, cares and anxieties. In the Ayemenem House she is treated as an outsider and becomes a victim of Baby Kochamma’s malice. At the time of Sophie Mol’s funeral she along with Estha is asked to stand separately. To Kuttapen she reveals her anguish against preference given to Sophie Mol.

“She has to stay indoors. She is very delicate. If she gets dirty, she’ll die” (210).

Unhappy with her intimacy with Velutha, Baby Kochamma instructs her, “Stop being so familiar with that man.” (184) Deprived of freedom to live her life in the way of her choice, Rahel feels as if she were a prisoner in the Ayemenem House. This leads to the germination of rebellious attitude in her towards the society. As R.S. Sharma puts it:

First of all she subverts the value system of society of elevating what is considered low and detectable. She decorates a knob of dung with flowers. Her colliding against the other girls in the convent to see whether breasts hurt is an expression of rebellion against the suppression of sexuality in conventional Christian education. Thirdly, the burning of the false hair bun of her house-mistress is a protest against vanity and artificiality in human relations. (4)

During her college days she develops her intimacy with Lorry Mac Caslin, an American student pursuing research on Energy Efficiency in Vernacular Architecture, and drifts “into marriage like a passenger drifts towards an unoccupied chair in an airport lounge with sitting down sense.” (18) Shortly, after marriage she experiences the meaninglessness of married life, takes divorce and for a few months serves as a waitress in an Indian restaurant in New York and for several years works “As a night clerk in a bullet proof cabin at a gas station outside Washington where drunks occasionally vomited into the money tray, and pimps prepositioned her with more lucrative job offers”. (20) When she comes to know of Estha’s return to Ayemenem, she comes back to Ayemenem in the hope that Estha’s company will make her forget her traumatic past and reduce the pain of existence in a place like the Ayemenem House where nothing belongs to her.

Thus, the novel presents a big boundary between the world of big things and the world of small things. Among the male characters Velutha, Vellya Paapen and Kuttappen represent the dark world that has no comfort to offer to its residents. Along side this world exists the world of big bulls like Chacko and K.N.M. Pillai who keep a distance from the lower strata of society and show their utmost insensitivity to the plight of the subaltern. Velutha desperately struggles to move from the periphery to the centre and in this struggle he sacrifices his life. His father Vellya Paapen is more intelligent than him in that he is aware of the repercussions of crossing the boundary. For having dared to jump down to the periphery, Ammu is locked up by Mammachi, humiliated by the Police Inspector and is forced by Chacko to leave the Ayemenem House. In view of the tragic situations to which those who dare to cross the set boundary are subjected, there appears a little possibility for the modern society to witness a day when the wall of dichotomy between the rich and the poor, the exploiters and the exploited, will crumble.

**Works Cited:**

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